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GOD AND LUCKY STARS

Trinity, Newark - March 27, 1960
(Sermon by Mr. Geyer, announcing his change of appointment)

The subject originally advertised for this morning was the question: "What Does Your Faith Mean to You?" Since we have changed the subject, I am very much afraid that somebody out there among you will sue us for fraudulent advertising. What is even worse than that, some of you will doubtless conclude that I really didn't have any faith to preach about in the first place. And, if you don't yet believe that just now, you may believe it before I finish today.

"God and Lucky Stars": when this substitute subject was announced to the choir Thursday night, Austin slugged me with the comment: "Well, our preacher is off on his favorite topic of astrology again!" And Mary Lou stabbed me with the bitter complaint: "Just when I try to select an appropriate solo for your sermon, you go off and preach on something else!" Happily, she remembered after a few moments that the word "stars", at least, was to be sung in her solo.

"God and Lucky Stars": this was the title of one of the wildest, craziest stories ever written -- namely, an autobiography I once had to write for a seminary course in the study of biography. It was the conviction of our professor that every minister should, at some time in his pastorate in any church, share his own life-story with his congregation. A congregation has a right to know how their minister "got that way", he felt. I chose the title "God and Lucky Stars" for that assignment to express both what I had come to feel about my own life and what had become a doctrine of my own personal creed.

Do not worry: you will be spared the agony of hearing that wild story told in full this morning! Still, it has an appropriateness for what I want to say to you today. God has blessed my life in ways too wonderful and too personal to be completely told here and now. But I believe, as I am sure I have said to you before, that a Christian must have a doctrine of luck as well as a doctrine of grace. Many things happen to us, not because God directly wills that they should happen to us, but because he has made a lively universe and has made us His very free creatures within it. The very vitality and freedom which we experience in God's creation means that we can fall into both good fortune and bad fortune. Some people, from the very earliest years in their lives, seem to keep falling into bad luck. Others, and I am one of them, keep falling into good luck. And God's will is not that we should have either good luck or bad luck, but that we take every circumstance, with its possibilities for both bad and good, and offer it up to Him to be transformed by His gracious power into something sacred for His sake and for the more creative fulfillment of all His children.

I do have a personal story to tell you today. I want to tell it as simply and directly as I can, and I pray that God will use it, far beyond any worth in my own words, for your own understanding and, if it can be so, for your inspiration. In this case, I will tell you the end of the story first, which several of you already know, in order that we may spend our time and thought on the middle of the story, and not the end of it. At the meeting of the Newark Annual Conference at Drew in May, Bishop Newell will be appointing me to another position. Next year, I will be serving in a Presbyterian college in Virginia as an assistant professor of political science. It is important for me to make one point very clearly: the decision to leave Trinity and to return to teaching is my own decision, so far as any such choice can be. I say this because I do not want you to think that either Bishop Newell or Dr. Neff, our superintendent, has insisted or even suggested that I should now consider it my duty to teach again. And the leaders of our own congregation have been so kind to me that they have said they would either welcome me back or understand my reasons for going to Virginia. So, if there is any blame for this decision, it is my own, and nobody else's. (On the other hand, if there is credit to be given for this decision and Trinity Church should discover, as I am very much afraid it will, that it much better off without me, please remember that I'm the fellow who deserves the credit for getting rid of me!)

For more than six weeks now, I have been involved in a network of telephone calls, correspondence, and conferences with regard to this decision. There is no purpose to be served by telling you the details of these discussions. But it would be best for all of us if I should share with you my own thoughts about why I feel it is well for me to go

Some of you will remember that I was teaching political science at the time my father died just over two years ago. The Methodist Church and the National Council on Religion in Higher Education had both provided me with generous fellowships for graduate study on the assumption that I would spend most of my life in college and seminary teaching. For ten uninterrupted years now, my deepest sense of vocation has been to contribute everything I could to the struggle of all nations and all peoples for world peace. I had come increasingly to feel that the churches were, on the one hand, in the most strategic position to change the minds and hearts of men in this tragically divided world; but that, on the other hand, the churches had hardly begun to develop the competence and the will and the discipline to meet this single most important challenge of this generation. It particularly seemed to me that the churches and Christian people did not very well understand that peace is a political as well as a moral problem; that government has become the decisive institution of this twentieth century; and that, unless Christians learn the necessary arts of government and politics and perform them with both the courage of Christian conviction and the skill which only wisdom and experience can provide, this whole anxious, troubled human family could obliterate itself in a very little time. And so I wanted to teach in the field of government and foreign policy -- as a Christian minister. I discovered gratefully that there were other persons and at least a few colleges and seminaries who felt as I did. I knew then, as I know now, that it can be very hard to combine these apparently very different interests. Our churches are still filled with well-meaning people who do not think that religion should have anything to do with politics -- even if the survival of all of God's children should depend upon changing those very attitudes. Likewise, the political science profession and the practical world of the politicians find it very hard to believe that the Christian faith should really have any meaning for their work.

And so I was teaching when death came and took your minister and my father. Some of you came to the wrong conclusion about my succeeding him here at Trinity: you thought it was a noble thing to do, a great sacrifice, to leave what I was doing -- just out of some sense of family loyalty. Let me relieve you of that conclusion, once-and-for-all. I have gained far more by being at Trinity these two years than I have been able to give. Do not call it "sacrifice" for me to have had the holiest honor of continuing my father's work for just this short time. There is no church in this country where a minister could work with a more profound sense that whatever he does is of great urgency. Here, there are tremendous things going on: old patterns are crukbling, there are the life-and-death issues of urban America, new adjustments are being made, and, by God's grace, a more faithful Christian church is beginning to emerge. In this church and this community, there is the priceless opportunity for "Christian soldiers" to march onward together: we have no dull or routine ministry here. There are battles to fight, and victories which must be won. I have never known a community in which there was a greater solidarity among those who were enlisted in the highest causes of that community. No keener challenge faces the churches of Newark right now than that of being faithful to their own "ministry of reconciliation": keeping the men and women of concern working together, accepting differences, but understanding one another, trusting one another, supporting one another.

Within Trinity Church these two years, you cannot call it "sacrifice" for me to have had the supporting fellowship of these friendliest of people. I have never been willing to concede that a minister should hide behind the robes of his position and not have friends -- or be a friend. Friendship can mean exclusiveness or favoritism or prejudice -- but it need not mean these things. Trinity Church was an uncommonly warm and friendly place long before I came, and it will continue to be that long after I leave. We have shared so many things together. With some of you, there have been hours of personal disappointment or family tragedy which will bind us to one another always. More often, happily, we have been able to rejoice together over blessings and achievements, especially through our whole Centennial celebrations. My first child learned to walk and to talk here, and my second was born here -- and by now you have spoiled both of them with your cooing and slobbering attention to them! I don't want to name names this morning, but think of what it has meant to me to have had the marvelous and dedicated staff I have had here: without exception, great, gifted, unusual Christian saints. Not the least of your gifts to me is the gift of freedom: freedom to let my imagination run wild, to try new things, to experiment, to create. And you have given me another freedom: a freedom of speech which I hope you will give to everyone who ever stands here before you. You have never told me what I must say here, or what I must not say. I have almost loved this pulpit too much because there have been so many Sunday mornings when you have responded generously and appreciatively to a message or an issue or a personal conviction for which you might have tarred and feathered me!

Therefore, for all these most selfish reasons, I want you to know that I have not regarded my service here as a "detour" from my intended vocation, nor as any great "sacrifice" simply for the sake of family loyalty.

These are all reasons for staying, and not for leaving. There are five hundred reasons for not leaving -- reasons that have to do mostly with particular people, every one of of you and others, to whom I feel very close and most deeply indebted. Some of you have been ministers to me far more than I have been a minister to you. There are additional reasons for wanting to stay and not to go. In our community and our city, some opportunities are just beginning to open up. We are on the threshold of new possibilities for community development in Clinton Hill: the city is evidencing an interest now in neighborhood planning and development, and the YM-YWCA is expanding its community extension work in our area. It has been my hope that the churches and the community councils together might seize the opportunity for an intensive effort at political education on a non-partisan basis on the South Side. Our part of the city has the highest percentage of unregistered voters; it is the most unrepresented area in our major city departments and in our Congressional district; and we have the greatest problem of indifference and cynicism with regard to political life. The Newark Council of Churches, only a few months old now, is already blessed with unparalleled opportunities to help shape our city's major decisions for the next decade. And so Protestantism is once again finding that it has a voice in Newark.

If I were to carry on in this same spirit, you would surely have your worst suspicions confirmed: that I am probably more of a politician than a pastor! Interestingly enough, a city official who inadvertently learned last week that I was leaving, said it was more important for me to have City Hall understand why I am going than for Trinity Church to understand! This was not said to flatter me, because he knew as well as I that my name is "Mud" with at least several city officials. More important, he was commenting on what this whole church has come to stand for in our city, and much less upon the personality of its minister.

Six weeks ago, I received a long-distance call from the president of Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia. Dr. Samuel Spencer is a member, as I am, of the National Council on Religion in Higher Education. This is a fellowship of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews whose stated principle is that "liberal learning and religion belong together, and that religion on the campus, as well as in society as a whole, finds its deepest expression and abiding significance through persons who, in their personal lives and professional work, combine sound scholarship and genuine religious commitment." Dr. Spencer told me that the Sullivan Foundation had just given his college a five-year grant to establish a new department of government. He added his own personal hope that whoever should come to create this new department would have both religious training and a primary interest in international relations.

It took me more than two weeks to decide whether I should even go down and visit the college. I had been assuming that, our Methodist hierarchy willing, I would stay at Trinity at least another year. There were so many reasons for wanting to stay here. But I got bombarded with letters and calls and propaganda and finally decided to take a day off and go to Staunton. It was a fantastic 24 hours. The planes on both legs of the flight going down had to be replaced; a blizzard in Virginia grounded my return flight; and the new porter on the overnight train which I finally took home tried to put ke off the train at Trenton instead of Newark! But, between the hazards of going and coming, I got to know a great deal about an outstanding college and an historic community. Staunton is in the heart of the

Shenandoah Valley between the Blue Ridge and the Alleghenies. Thomas Jefferson's home is not far away at Charlottesville. Abraham Lincoln's grandfather Abraham farmed just south of Staunton. Woodrow Wilson was born in a house across the street from the college.

But my first serious question was to ask what the Board of Directors there, mostly Southern men and women, would feel if they really knew who I was! On the face of it, it seemed wild even to imagine that the minister of a Northern church, an interracial church, and a person who had the convictions I held about race relations, would be acceptable to them. The president and the dean are natives of South Carolina: how would they feel toward me? The president replied very frankly: "I don't know how all the members of the Board will feel. I had to ask the same question when I became president. You see, my teaching field was American history, and my own speciality has been American N egro history. I am working toward the day when this college will become a fully integrated institution. It will take time. When the issue of desegregation comes to Staunton, and it will come soon, I will have to speak out. Our own students will become tomorrow's leaders in hundreds of communities all over the South. We have our own opportunity to contribute to Christian understanding and concern."

A week later, the formal invitation came to me. I talked it over with the members of my family, with Dr. Neff and Bishop Newell, and with two of Trinity's own leaders. Everyone seemed to have mixed feelings about it, as I did. Some seemed to feel that I should go; more than one person thought I would be a bum if I did go. I could get into trouble there if I went. Bishop Newell said that he would appoint me, but was fearful that my colleagues in the Newark Conference might take away my membership and my orders for teaching at a Presbyterian rather than a Methodist college. But, by last Tuesday night, I had decided to go. It could only be a prayerful decision for me, not because prayer gives us easy answers, nor because I am more pious or spiritual than any of you -- but because prayer at least provides the mood of seriousness and thoughtfulness with which one must make any decision which affects others as well as one's self: in this case, my family, our church, our community, our conference, and that college. It is an awesome thing to discover how any one of us can get tangled in a whole complicated network of obligations, all of which seem terribly important. The overriding issue for me was, however, the fact that I could now be working full-time for this purpose which has claimed me for as long as I can remember: the witness of Christian faith to public policy and international affairs. I have not been able to do as much for that purpose here as I should have liked to do. Every now and then, I have tried to say here that some of us must work, not just for this neighborhood or this city, but for the whole human race and its struggle for peace in our time. Perhaps never again in my lifetime would I have a right to expect that I could have the opportunity to create a whole new department of government and international relations -- and upon the foundations of Christian faith and understanding.

Well, I have taken myself much too seriously, and I have taken far too much of your time, to reveal myself as an anguished Hamlet trying to make up his mind. The bright side of it all has been the knowledge that both our local churches and our college campuses need trained leadership, and that I could find more than enough challenge and reward in either setting. I have been very very lucky to have had both opportunities.

For Trinity Church, as for any church, changing leadership means certain problems of adjustment. Just as surely, it means new opportunities for the church to strengthen itself and to move forward. We can be grateful for the way in which our Methodist connectional system moves quickly to provide personnel for its churches. Bishop Newell and Dr. Neff are already at work to secure for Trinity a strong, able minister. Whoever comes to you will give you strength in some areas of our work that I have not been able to provide. I have not been a very good fund-raiser, nor is church attendance what it ought to be, nor have I been very much help to our church school. I know better than any of you that there have been too many times when the personal needs of our own members have seemed to be neglected because I was wrapped up in other matters. There have been important community causes which deserve more of my support than I have given. All too often, I have taken members of the staff for granted and left lay members with heavy burdens and no guidance.

If "the good old days" of Trinity Church turn our thoughts back a generation, the <u>great</u> days of Trinity Church are in the living present and the generation to come. Whatever you may think of me and of this decision I have had to make, do not let it be any reason for relenting in your loyalty to this church -- which is, after all, so much more important than its minister or any other individual.

I am glad that we have more than two months yet to work together. We can get all of these sentimentalities out of the way this morning and move through these Lenten Days in a new spirit of appreciation for what our church means to us. Palm Sunday will be a thrilling day, and we shall celebrate the Sacrament and have fine music on Holy Thursday. Easter is the very symbol of new life in the church. Children's Day and our church picnic will make us all young again. And there are the unceasing tasks of our organizational life in both church and community which are so important just now.

There should be no mystery now about these words, "God and Lucky Stars". Both have come to me and been most kind to me -- and I shall always hope that it may be just so with you, too.

As you have been told several times, my most constant prayer has been that of St. Francis of Assisi. In his simple, joyful, consecrated spirit, let us pray:

"Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled,
as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen."

Alan Geyer